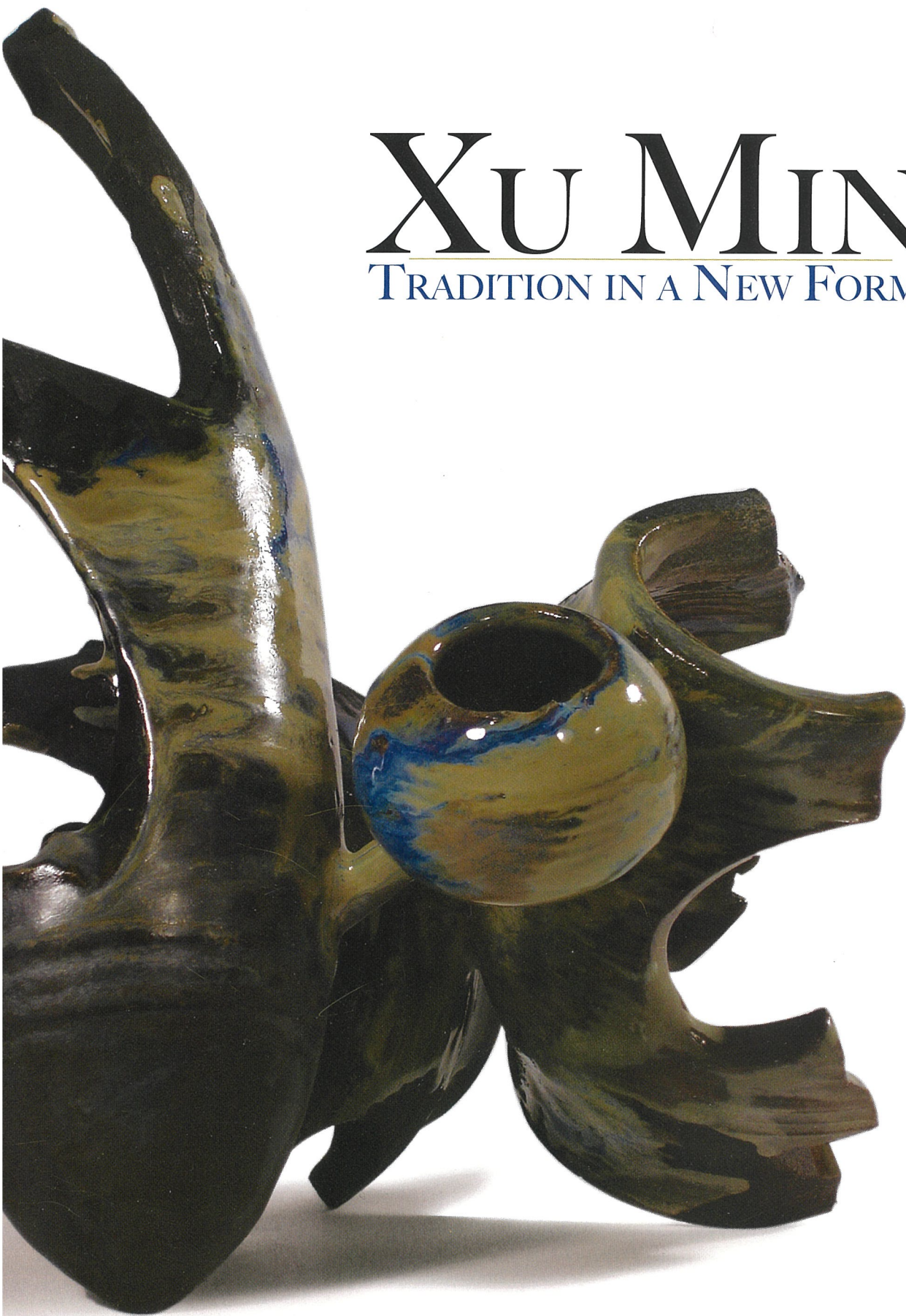


XU MIN

TRADITION IN A NEW FORM





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February 2 - February 24, 2006

Gallery 205
Radford University Art Museum
Radford, Virginia

A FOCUS ON SPACE

It is not without reason that Xu Min, master ceramicist, started in his early childhood and youth as a painter; historically, the Chinese themselves considered calligraphy and painting to be artistically prior to all the other forms of visual art. The calligraphic spirit in the decoration of his vessels and the painterly application of the glazes speak to the reverence he still holds for Chinese art traditions while bending to contemporary philosophy.

When I first espied Xu Min's ceramic sculptures it was in a large antiques warehouse in Maryland, amidst Chinese paintings and antique furniture. From a distance these small but monumental forms appeared to be ritualistic vessels that had liberated themselves from spatial confinements. What intrigued me was a certain innovative defiance in the way Xu Min has deconstructed the solid ceremonial Yang forms into spatial configurations that emphasize Yin.

Xu Min's vessels focus on space. Each part of the form as it is thrown on the wheel is visualized for its spatial potentials in terms of looking at it from the inside out. Balance is sought in each piece by constructing solid sides and top to emphasize the space in and around. Whether the form is capped by a beautiful Yang disc or a sphere, the vessel retains its Yin emphasis by the use of right angles and a broken silhouette and expresses a quiet rhythm, typical of Chinese Scholar gardens. It is interesting to look at some of Xu Min's reconstructed pieces and draw comparison with the forms of the 'Scholar's Rocks' that the Chinese literati would keep in their sparse studios for meditation.

In the Han dynasty, gardens were created to represent paradises where only immortals could exist. These paradises contained rocks that were extremely weathered and worn, with numerous perforations, indentations and whimsical shapes to represent mountains that were craggy, inaccessible and isolated. The rocks were arranged either singly or grouped to represent a mountain range, a particular set of mountains, or sometimes a specific mountain. Xu Min's broken forms with their earth-tone glazes are reminiscent of these rocks. Each vessel-form has a capricious quality inviting contemplation.

Many of Xu Min's goblet-like forms are inspired by Chüeh and Ting tripod goblets, especially in his use of the hollow legs; these elements are recycled pieces that have all been thrown on the wheel and belong to different objects. When Xu Min states that "I break form after I finish on the wheel, using imperfect pieces that are put together to make it beautiful," he takes a postmodernist perspective on Chinese traditional vessels and fundamental Chinese values as insufficient and contingent and views the development of the art of ceramics as a teleological concept that gives a narrative lucidity to transformation through time. Though his work stems from tradition, he has gone outside its confines to replace it with a newfound relativism, negotiating for himself a new concept of Chinese metaphysics.

Halide Salam, Ph.D.
Curator

XU MIN'S CERAMICS: DIALOGUE WITH TRADITION

The ceramic art of Xu Min is at heart a recombinatory and fragmentary conversation with traditional Chinese vessel forms. Shards of wheel-thrown pottery are brought together in an additive process that simultaneously suggests a play on historical forms and an insistent probing of their essence.

Echoing Zhou ceramic and bronze work (1045–256 B.C.E.), many of Xu Min's ceramics depend literally and metaphorically on the profile of the feet — the most conspicuous ornamental feature of Zhou vessels. He addresses not only their form profiles, but investigates the relationship between solid and void that forms the basis of much Zhou typology. Zhou ancient tripod types were differentiated by this solid/void dynamic — Li, having hollow legs that are a continuation of the vessel space, and Ding, having independent, solid legs attached as independent elements to a separate vessel-bowl. Xu Min's works do not so much copy the shapes of these ancient vessels as impart a critical reversal to them. For example, *Oil Lamp* (cat. 6) is supported on three legs whose profile is the negative of a Zhou Li (figure 1) — where the Li leg is convex and volumetric, his work is concave and hollow, a negative space.



figure 1

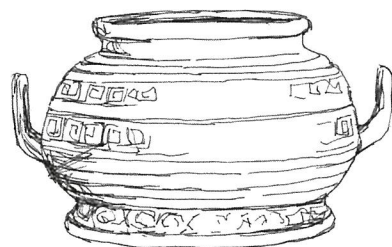


figure 2

Xu Min develops this topological inversion into a strategy of syntactical recombination. The elements of the traditional Gui vessel (figure 2), with its rounded container form supported on an integral base and sporting handles of distinctive profile, are arguably all found in *Factor of Future* (cat. 3) — a shallow, rimmed plate elevated on three pins over a rounded bowl, all supported on three legs. The same elements, but organized under a very different aesthetic impulse: the “plate” in Xu Min's work represents the elevation and thus the independence of the Gui base, while the Gui's handles are suggested in the curved leg profiles of his piece, which however open outward into the space around the vessel.

The Zhou Dynasty is traditionally seen as the fountainhead of Chinese culture, especially of those values and ideas that undergird societal relations. Today, the vessels of that era are symbols of those principles of hierarchy, decorum and static order that have guided Chinese culture for so long as to seem unquestionable universals. Xu Min's works borrow consciously from Zhou vessel forms but reconfigure the design syntax of the fragmentary parts. In doing so, the artist reveals his project — a radical recasting of the relationship between tradition and modernity.

Like modern-day China, late Zhou was a turbulent epoch that gave birth to new styles and new ideas. By incorporating elements from multiple traditional Zhou vessel forms, Xu Min's recombinatory tactic both honors them and throws a cordon around them, and thus around tradition itself. Isolating, analyzing and reconfiguring traditional forms are the first steps toward moving beyond them.

It has been a pleasure working with Dr. Salam on this project. It is only through her efforts that the exhibition has come to fruition. Our thanks to Professor Z.L. Feng for the line drawings of the Zhou Dynasty vessels.

The illustrations in this catalogue closely follow the circular layout of the exhibition. The vessels were installed to suggest a typological progression that leads back to the start. You may reenact this experience by returning to the first illustrations after looking at the last.

Preston Thayer
Director,
RU Art Museum



1
Factor of future #15
Stoneware, glazed and mineral green
17 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ "
2005



2
Factor of future #4
Stoneware, glazed and mineral green
8 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ "
2002



3
Factor of future
Stoneware, glazed
7" x 14" x 14"
2002



4
Factor of future #12
Stoneware, dull glaze
11 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ "
2005



5
Space V 145
Stoneware, glazed
10" x 7" x 7"
2000



6
Oil Lamp
Stoneware, matt glaze
9" x 9" x 9"
2004



7
Factor of future #3
Stoneware, glazed and mineral green
11 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 11 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 11 $\frac{1}{4}$ "
2003



8
Free Space #35
Stoneware, glazed
14" x 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ "
2004



9
Free Space #28
Stoneware, glazed
14" x 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ "
2001



10
Space H 146
Stoneware, glazed
7" x 9" x 8"
2000



11
Oil Lamp
Stoneware, glazed
11 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 7" x 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ "
2003



12
Free Space #45
Stoneware, glazed
11 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 8" x 11"
2004



13
Free Space #50
Stoneware, glazed
7" x 8 1/4" x 8"
2005



14
Free Space #57
Stoneware, glazed
7 1/2" x 11" x 8"
2005



15
Free Space #59
Stoneware, glazed
9" x 7" x 7"

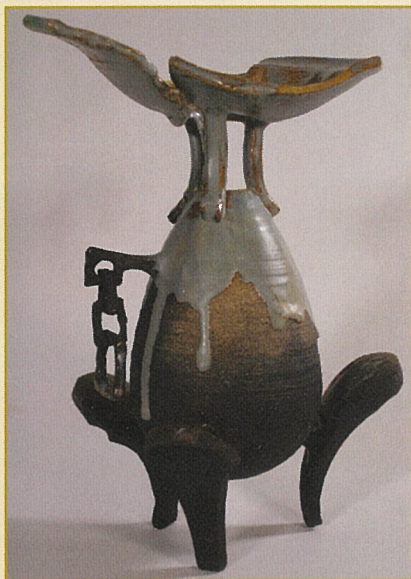
XU MIN: BIOGRAPHY

Xu Min was born in 1955 in Shanghai, China. Influenced by his parents, he loved to paint and was fascinated by eastern and western art from a young age. In 1972, during the Cultural Revolution, he was sent to the countryside after graduating from high school. He was assigned to the construction team on a farming cooperative and became a masonry worker. A year later, he was transferred to the cooperative's architecture design department, where he began working on architectural drawings. He began to specialize in three-dimensional models, exploring interactions between objects and space, circulation within space and the infinite combinations of objects.

In 1978 as the Cultural Revolution ended, the college enrollment system resumed in China. Xu Min passed the competitive entrance examination with outstanding scores, and was the only Shanghai student admitted to the pottery department of The Central Academy of Arts and Crafts in Beijing (a prestigious art college in China, akin to the Bauhaus in Germany). At the Academy, he received a rigorous and systematic education, graduating in 1982.

Xu Min spent 1985 at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. He studied in the studio of Vally Possony from 1990-92. In 1993 he furthered his study session at the Yixin Ceramic Workshop in Jiangsu Province, China.

His works of art have been displayed and collected in China, Australia, Japan and the United States, and have been the subject of several articles and exhibitions.



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